

"Exhibit A Against Media Concentration"

Online Beat by John Nichols

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CBS officials are still refusing to air a MoveOn.org Voter Fund commercial during Sunday's Super Bowl game because that the 30-second advertisement criticizes President Bush's fiscal policies. There is no question that the network's determination to censor critics of the president damages the political discourse. But the network has not exactly silenced dissent. In fact, CBS's heavy-handed tactics are fueling an outpouring of grassroots anger over the dominance of communications in the United States by a handful of large media corporations. More than 400,000 Americans have contacted CBS to complain already, and the numbers are mounting hourly.

At the same time, the controversy surrounding the censorship of the MoveOn ad has heightened Congressional concern about lobbying by CBS's owner, Viacom, and other media conglomerates to lift limits on media consolidation and monopoly. U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, says CBS should be seen as: "Exhibit A in the case against media concentration."

"The CBS Eye has been closed to the truth and to fairness," he said. "CBS has a great, great legacy. It is a storied name when it comes to public information in America. This chapter is sad and disgraceful," argues Durbin, who took to the floor of the Senate to express his concern that CBS was censoring the ad as a favor to the White House that has aggressively supported

removing restrictions on the number of local television stations that can be owned by the network's parent company, Viacom.

CBS officials deny they are censoring the MoveOn ad as part of a political quid pro quo deal with a White House that has been friendly to the network's lobbying agenda. But U.S. Representative Bernie Sanders, I-Vermont, the leading Congressional critic of moves by the Federal Communications Commission to allow the "Big Four" networks to dramatically increase their ownership of local TV stations, says that the censorship of the MoveOn ad highlights the potential for abuse of the public trust by media corporations that grow large enough - and arrogant enough -- to constrict the political discourse at both the local and national levels.

"Denying MoveOn's 30 second spot about the federal budget deficit seems a thinly veiled political decision," explains Sanders. "I hope that Viacom's move is not in any way payback to the Bush Administration for its ongoing efforts to loosen federal rules to allow large companies like Viacom to own a larger and larger share of the media in this country. I hope it's not but the timing of CBS' censorship is troubling. Regardless, this seems to be the latest example of how concentrated power in the media system harms the public interest."

With US Representatives Jan Schakowsky, D-Illinois and Maurice Hinchey, D-New York, Sanders penned a letter to CBS President and CEO Les Moonves, which rebukes the network for refusing to sell air time to MoveOn. More than two dozen members of the House have signed on to the letter, which reads:

"We are writing to express our concerns about the decision of Viacom's CBS television network to deny MoveOn.org paid airtime during this year's Super Bowl. We believe this action sends a negative message to the American people about your network's commitment to preserving our democratic debate. Censoring this ad is an affront to free speech and an obstruction of the public's right to hear a diversity of voices over the public airwaves.

"CBS has said that the ad violated the network's policy against running issue advocacy advertising. However, the network has run a White House issue advocacy spot on the consequences of drug use during a past Super Bowl. CBS also will air a spot by Philip Morris USA and the American Legacy Foundation advocating against smoking during this year's Super Bowl. Additionally, the network profits enormously from the thousands of issue ads which air on CBS stations nationwide during election campaigns year after year. Because of these facts, we must call into question why CBS refuses the advertisement by MoveOn.org.

"Issue ads are commonplace and important for democratic debate. Yet, CBS seems to want to limit that debate to ads that are not critical of the political status quo, and in the case of the MoveOn ad, of the President and by extension the Republican-controlled Congress. Apparently, CBS feels that the topic covered in this paid advertisement--the federal government's budget crisis--is inappropriate or irrelevant for American viewers, despite being one of the most critical issues of our day.

"The choice not to run this paid advertisement appears to be part of a disturbing pattern on CBS's part to bow to the wishes of the Republican National Committee. We remember well CBS's remarkable decision this fall to self-censor at the direction of GOP pressure. The network shamefully cancelled a broadcast about former President Ronald Reagan which Republican partisans considered insufficiently flattering.

"Perhaps not coincidentally, CBS's decision to censor the Reagan program and to deny airtime to this commercial comes at a time when the White House and the Republican Congress are pushing to allow even greater and greater media concentration - a development from which Viacom stands to benefit handsomely. The appearance of a conflict is hard to ignore. There may not be a fire here, but there certainly is a great deal of smoke.

"As Members of Congress, it is our responsibility to point out the negative direction in which we see CBS heading. You have been entrusted by the American people as stewards of the public airwaves. We ask that you not violate that trust and that you not censor this ad."

In addition to Sanders, Schakowsky and Hinchey, signers of the letter include Representatives Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio; Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio; George Miller, D-California; Bob Filner, D-California; Diane Watson, D-California; Barbara Lee, D-California; Lynn Woolsey, D-California; Pete Stark, D-California; Sam Farr, D-California; Jerry Nadler, D-New York; Louise Slaughter, D-New York; Jose Serrano, D-New York; Major Owens, D-New York; Peter DeFazio, D-Oregon; Tammy Baldwin, D-Wisconsin; Raul Grijalva, D-Arizona; Jay Inslee, D-Washington; Brian Baird, D-Washington; John Olver, D-Massachusetts; Bennie Thompson, D-Mississippi; Robert Wexler, D-Florida and Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Illinois.

Congressional Progressive Caucus co-chair Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, a Democratic presidential contender, also signed the letter.

